

Rosselli Called a Victim of Mafia Because of His Senate Testimony

By NICHOLAS GAGE

Shortly after John Rosselli testified before a Senate committee that he had participated in Central Intelligence Agency plots to kill Fidel Castro, a Washington friend asked him if he wasn't afraid for his life. The 70-year-old Mafia figure appeared unconcerned: "Who'd want to kill an old man like me?" he asked.

Last Aug. 7, when Miami police fished a 55-gallon oil drum from Dumbofounding Bay and found Mr. Rosselli's body inside, there was no shortage of suspects, ranging from the C.I.A. to Cuban agents or the Mafia itself.

However, two men known to have had personal knowledge of the circumstances of the murder have provided solid information that Mr. Rosselli was killed by members of the underworld as a direct result of his testimony before the Senate Committee.

The two men have provided details about Mr. Rosselli's death that are strongly supported by physical evidence uncovered in an extensive investigation by The New York Times, which involved the examination of numerous documents, including Mr. Rosselli's testimony about the Kennedy assassination, and scores of interviews.

A Picture of Rise and Fall

The investigation provided as well a picture of Mr. Rosselli's rise and fall within the Mafia and a rare insight into the operation of organized crime.

Early speculation that the C.I.A. or Cuban agents might have been involved in the Rosselli murder centered on the fact that another participant in the Castro assassination plots, Sam Giancana, a former Mafia boss of Chicago, had been murdered in his home a year earlier. Mr. Giancana was killed shortly before he was to be summoned before the Senate Committee on Intelligence.

Mr. Rosselli himself testified for the committee three times, the last a secret appearance three months before his death, when he was questioned about the assassination of President Kennedy.

The C.I.A. may have been involved, according to one theory, because it feared further damaging revelations about its

Mafia connections. The Cuban agents may have been involved, according to another theory, because they sought to retaliate for the plots to kill Mr. Castro.

But the manner of Mr. Rosselli's murder differed sharply from that of any Cuban who has been killed in Miami, by either supporters or enemies of Fidel Castro. "If Cubans had killed Rosselli, they would have shot him down in the street or blown him up in his car to make a point, not stuffed him in a barrel and thrown him in the bay," said Detective Julio Ojeda, a member of the Miami homicide team investigating the Rosselli murder, who is himself of Cuban origin.

The Cuban retaliation theory is also discounted by authorities because Robert Maheu, the most important figure in the plots against Mr. Castro and later a chief aide to the late Howard R. Hughes, has not been touched. "I think Castro is sophisticated enough to know the historical context in which those things [the plots on his life] were done," and forget about them, he said in an interview.

Nevertheless, some of Mr. Rosselli's friends still believe Cuban agents were involved. They base their suspicions to some degree on the fact that Mr. Rosselli, before his death, told them he had information that Castro agents were involved in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Three months before his death, on April 23, 1976, Mr. Rosselli was questioned about the Kennedy assassination by representatives of the Senate intelligence committee, including Senator Richard S. Schweiker, the Pennsylvania Republican, in a secret session in a suite of the Carroll Arms Hotel.

The transcript of Mr. Rosselli's testimony has been classified "top secret" but a copy of it was examined by The Times.

Mr. Rosselli testified that he had told some people he believed that Fidel Castro was behind the Kennedy assassination. When asked by Michael Epstein, a member of the committee's staff, if he had "any facts" to back up his supposition, he replied: "No facts."

The possibility that the C.I.A. may have had Mr. Rosselli killed to keep him from disclosing damaging facts about the agency is discounted by those who know him best, including his closest friend, Joseph Breen, who was his partner in the gift shop at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, which provided Mr. Rosselli's only source of income—\$60,000 a year—at the time of his death.

Mr. Breen said the C.I.A. would not have killed Mr. Rosselli over his Senate committee testimony because he had checked with the C.I.A., including Bill Harvey, "his C.I.A. contact—prior to his appearance, and they told him to tell whatever he knew 'because it was going to come out anyway.' The agency, he said, 'would have no reason to kill him.'"

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No Check With Mafia

Mr. Rosselli, however, was not so conscientious about clearing his Senate testimony with his Mafia associates, according to a high-ranking Mafia figure, and it was this infraction that led to his death.

"When you're called before a committee like that, you have to go to your people and ask them what to do," the Mafia figure said. "Rosselli not only did not come to us, he went before the committee and shot his mouth off all over the place."

He said Mafia leaders had been angry with Mr. Rosselli since 1971 when he appeared before a Federal grand jury in Los Angeles investigating underworld involvement in the Frontier Hotel. Three Mafia leaders went to prison as a result of that investigation, and Mr. Rosselli was suspected—correctly, as it turned out—of having secretly provided information to the prosecution.

The Mafia figure said that shortly after Mr. Rosselli's first appearance before the Senate committee on June 24, 1975, his murder was approved by the commission of bosses that sets policy for the 26 Mafia families in the country.

Several members of the commission had wanted Mr. Rosselli killed since the Frontier Hotel case, and when the rest learned that he testified before the Senate committee, "they decided he would just go on talking every time he was pressured, and he had to be hit," the Mafia figure said.

Confirmation by Mafia Source

This explanation was confirmed in its essential points by Frank Bompensiero, the Mafia boss of San Diego, before he was shot to death outside his home on Feb. 10, apparently because the Mafia found out he had been giving information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The other important Mafia figure who talked about the Rosselli murder is not an F.B.I. informant but has provided information to The Times on a pledge that his identity would be protected.

He said that the reasons for the elimination of Mr. Rosselli were not related to the reasons for Sam Giancana's murder, although the same Mafia group, the Chicago family, was responsible.

Mr. Giancana was killed because he tried to reassert his authority in Chicago after a 10-year absence. "Sam thought nothing had changed, but everything had changed," the Mafia figure said. The task of killing Mr. Rosselli proved difficult because he was a cautious man. Nevertheless, his pursuers were persistent. "They would watch his movements for a couple of weeks, leave him alone for a few months, then go back and watch him some more," the Mafia figure said. "Rosselli was careful but nobody can be that careful. When the decision is made to hit you—you're dead no matter how long it takes."

Mr. Rosselli's friends and relatives confirmed that he moved with extreme caution during the year after his Senate testimony, staying close to the rambling, white brick home of his sister and brother-in-law, Edith and Joseph Daigle, in Plantation, Fla. He moved in with the couple when he was released from prison in 1974.

The Daigles told authorities that Mr. Rosselli spent most days sitting by the

pool reading, and most nights watching television. The few times he went out to dinner, he had his sister call the restaurants and make reservations in her name, and he always dined out or played golf in the company of relatives and friends.

The only known instances when he deviated from this pattern, according to Miami authorities, were when he had dinner with Santos Trafficante Jr., boss of Mafia rackets in Florida and the one major underworld figure with whom Mr. Rosselli maintained close contact in his last years.

The two dined together for the last time at the Landings Restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on July 16, 12 days before Mr. Rosselli was killed. Authorities believe it was a member of the Trafficante organization who was able to lure Mr. Rosselli to his death.

On July 28 Mr. Rosselli and his sister ate a late brunch and then, at 12:50 p.m., he left in her car, a silver 1975 Chevrolet Impala. He gave no hint of having an appointment and she assumed he would be back soon.

What happened then was described by the unnamed Mafia figure. Mr. Rosselli drove to a marina and went aboard a private boat where he was received by two men, one an old friend, the other a visitor from Chicago.

The boat put off, and a third man on shore drove the Rosselli car to the Miami International Airport, where it was later found.

While Mr. Rosselli was sipping a glass of vodka, the man from Chicago grabbed him from behind and held his hand tightly over Mr. Rosselli's nose and mouth until he was asphyxiated—not a difficult feat because Mr. Rosselli had emphysema. "Within an hour after he got on the boat, he was dead," the Mafia figure said.

Aboard the boat was an empty metal oil drum, 36 inches high and 22 inches in diameter, with a number of holes cut into it so that it would fill with water and sink.

Body Stuffed Into Drum

A Cannon washcloth was taped tightly over Mr. Rosselli's mouth to make sure he was dead. Then his legs were sawed off so that the body could be stuffed into the drum.

To lift the body into the oil drum, the men tied a rope around the neck and stuck a tow hook into each side of the abdomen just under the ribs. While one man hoisted the body with the rope, the other lifted with the two hooks.

When the torso was finally lowered into the drum, the legs were stuffed in with it and heavy iron chains were laced through the holes in the drum, around the body and over the lid of the drum.

But the drum had not been weighted enough, and 10 days later three fishermen spotted it on the edge of a sandbar beside a 28-foot-deep canal. They suspected a body might be inside and called police.

The murder was the final step in a long slide from Mr. Rosselli's zenith as the Mafia's Las Vegas ambassador, an impeccably well-dressed ladies' man who was deferred to by everyone on "The Strip."

His career turned downward in the late 1950's when his bosses in Chicago decided he was not looking after their Las Vegas investments carefully enough and had him shuttled to Los Angeles.

Mr. Rosselli had first gone to Los Angeles in the 1930's to help develop the Chicago family's gambling and labor rackets. His good looks and free-spending manner charmed the Hollywood of that era. For a time he was married to an actress, June Lang, and he even co-produced three movies: "He Walked By Night," "T-Men," and "Canyon City."

"We never saw the gangster side of him," recalled Bryan Foy, a producer who remained a friend of Mr. Rosselli until his death. "He was a great guy. Half the people in this town were his friends. No one who ever had a drink or dinner with Johnny ever picked up a check."

But Mr. Rosselli's gangster side did exist. It had started in his teen-age years, according to an eight-page outline of his life he once wrote to persuade immigration authorities not to deport him.

Born Filippo Sacco in Esperia, Italy, on July 4, 1905, he arrived in Boston at the age of 6 with his mother and brothers to join his father, Vincenzo. After his father died his mother remarried and it was his stepfather, he said, who introduced him to crime by having him set fire to the family's house for the insurance. He dropped out of school after the seventh grade, later went to New York for three months where he took the name John Morgan, and then drifted to Chicago.

Honoring an Artist

In Chicago he made contact with the Mafia and was told that if he wanted to become a member he would have to have a more Italian name than John Morgan. He chose to call himself John Rosselli after Cosimo Rosselli "who finished the Sistine Chapel after Michelangelo," he wrote in the outline. "I read the name in the encyclopedia."

The Chicago bosses, impressed with the young man's acuity, sent him to Los Angeles, where he did well for them and himself until he went to prison in 1943 for extorting money from movie studios and theater chains. When he was released from jail in 1947, Mr. Rosselli began spending more time in Las Vegas.

Eventually he became known as the head fixer in the gambling capital, but though he gained prestige his bosses back in Chicago became dissatisfied and sent him to Los Angeles.

He resented his loss of prestige, according to friends, and when the C.I.A. asked his help, he saw it as a chance to impress the Chicago boss, Sam Giancana, with his political connections.

Mr. Rosselli's efforts to ingratiate himself with Mr. Giancana failed as badly as the plots against Castro. Even demoted to exile in Los Angeles, however, Mr. Rosselli still had considerable influence with the men who ran the Las Vegas casinos. He arranged for Mafia figures in Detroit and St. Louis to buy into the Frontier Hotel and later was instrumental in the sale of the Sands and Desert Inn to Howard Hughes, for which he got \$95,000 in finder's fees.

In 1967 his friend Joe Breen, who had

been involved in movie projects with Mr. Rosselli came to him for help. Mr. Breen, down on his luck, wanted the gift shop concession at the Frontier Hotel, but had been turned down. "Johnny walked to a telephone, made a call, then came back and told me the concession was mine," he said. In gratitude Mr. Breen made Mr. Rosselli a partner. "In all the time I knew him," Mr. Breen said, "Johnny never asked me to do anything illegal, or even immoral."

Not everyone remained grateful to Mr. Rosselli for the favors he had done them, however. Mr. Rosselli was instrumental in arranging for Howard Hughes to move to Las Vegas and for getting him the top floor of the Desert Inn Hotel. But later, when Mr. Rosselli approached Hughes aides for a \$50,000 loan, he was turned down.

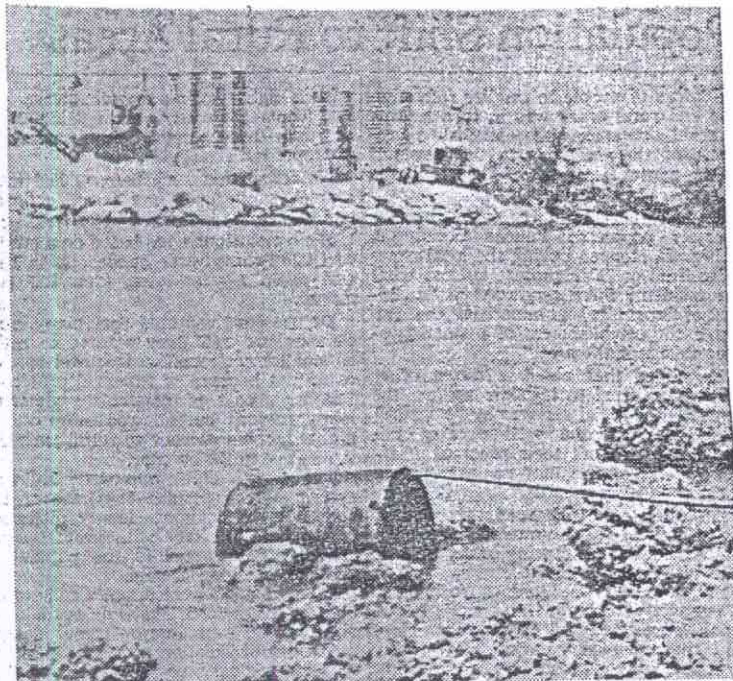
Mr. Rosselli needed the \$50,000 for legal fees because he had been charged with participating in a card cheating operation at the exclusive Friar's Club in Hollywood.

He was convicted and sent to the Federal prison in McNeil Island, Wash., where he did not stand up well to the rigors of prison life, according to his friends.

In 1971, Mr. Rosselli was brought from prison to testify before a grand jury looking into Mafia ownership of the Frontier Hotel. Mr. Rosselli at first refused to answer on constitutional grounds, but he was given immunity. Faced with the prospect of having more time added to his sentence, he agreed to cooperate, when promised that his testimony would be kept secret.

His information led Federal investigators to Maurice Friedman, the developer of the Frontier, who testified that Anthony Giordano, the Mafia boss of St. Louis, and Anthony Zerilli and Michael Polizzi, Mafia captains in Detroit, held hidden interests in the casino. All three went to prison as a result and have yet to be released.

Mr. Rosselli's testimony was tightly guarded, and although they were suspicious, there was no way the Mafia bosses could be sure he had talked. When he testified before the Senate committee without consulting Mafia superiors, however, their suspicions were confirmed, according to underworld informants.



A 55-gallon oil drum, containing the body of John Roselli, being pulled from the waters of Dumfoundling Bay in Miami last August.

Those who knew him best surmised that Mr. Rosselli took the risk of testifying without consulting his Mafia bosses because he was afraid he would be ordered not to talk or, even worse, not to appear at all, and would go to jail for contempt.

One side of John Rosselli reveled in the attention he received when he appeared before the committee. "I looked pretty good up there," he told Mr. Breen. "In fact, they said I looked like a lawyer."

Even though he was still financially strapped — promissory notes totaling \$25,000 were found after his death — Mr. Rosselli briefly felt as important as he once had been.

After his appearance before the committee, he asked Mr. Breen to find him an apartment in the Jockey Club in Las Vegas. Mr. Breen called him the day before he was murdered and told him that he didn't think the move was a good idea in view of Mr. Rosselli's financial condition. "But, Joe," Mr. Rosselli said, "that's where the action is."



The New York Times
John Roselli